**Forna, A. (2019) 'Why I write', *Kenyon Review*, 41 (6), pp. 17-22.**

First published in the *Kenyon Review*, Nov/Dec 2019 at https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/737942

# WHY I WRITE

By Aminatta Forna

There was a time when war was a man's business. Wars were fought by soldiers, and soldiers were men. Men gave their lives. So naturally men, male authors, took custody of the stories of other men and the wars they fought. Soldiers were the greatest casualties of war. And in the minds of many people this continues to be the case.

But the nature of war has changed. The battlefields of Europe during the Great War, in which armies faced each other dug into opposing trenches on either side of fields emptied of crops and livestock, belong to the past. Many if not most conflicts now are civil conflicts; they are fought in urban areas, and they are fought by rebel fighters, factions, militias, and self-styled armies. The fighters of today are very different from sixty years ago and so, too, are their victims. According to the UN International Children's Emergency Fund: "Civilian fatalities in wartime have climbed from 5 percent at the turn of the century ... to more than 90 percent in the wars of the 1990s and today".

"Armed conflict kills and maims more children than soldiers" noted Graça Machel, during her time as the UN independent expert on the impact of armed conflict on children. And women, too, suffer disproportionately as victims in war. The world now finds itself a place in which, perversely, the safest people in a war zone are likely to be the combatants. The phrase "women and children first" takes on a new and chilling meaning.

The change in the way wars are fought, upon whose bodies, has changed who writes about war and how they write. My own vivid memory as a young woman in the 1990s is of the reports by the British journalist Maggie O'Kane, one of the first, perhaps *the* first, to bring the stories of the horrors being inflicted upon the women of Bosnia during the Yugoslav conflict. Maggie O'Kane wasn't the first woman war correspondent; Margaret Bourke White and Martha Gelhorn matched male reporters for courage as they filed reports from the frontline. Maggie O'Kane's reports, though, were different, filed typically many miles *away* from the front line. They offered readers of her newspaper, the *Observer*, a different perspective on the Yugoslav war. Maggie O'Kane didn't talk to generals and commanders, she talked to the civilians in towns and villages near where the fighting was taking place, and she began to hear stories of rape, of the existence of rape camps where Bosnian women were held and used for sport by Serbian army soldiers. Rape was used as a weapon of war in Sierra Leone, in Darfur, it continues to be so in Congo. War is not, if it ever was, the provenance of men.

My first book was a memoir, the story of how a country loses its way, blundering from a place where people recognized some degree of moral certitude, step by blind step, into the dark space in which democracy gives way to dictatorship and oppression eventually gives way to war. When I am asked why I write about war, the answer necessarily takes me into talking about how I came to write fiction. The answer is that my road to becoming a novelist was a convoluted one. I did not set out to become a writer of fiction, I metamorphosed into one.

First published in the *Kenyon Review*, Nov/Dec 2019, Vol. XLI, No. 6.

I began my working career as a journalist. I thought journalism was a way of writing about the things that mattered to me and getting paid, which was what I needed at that time. In my midtwenties I became a television reporter with the BBC. A decade later I was done. I have often said the happiest two days of my career as a journalist were the day I first walked into the BBC and the day I walked out. I was never content as a reporter for a large organization. And Africa, it scarcely needs to be said, was not a priority. Once in the 1990s, following a tip-off from a UN worker, I approached my editor with a story about atrocities being committed in Darfur. My editor looked upon me with weary kindliness before he replied: "Middle England is not interested in Africa."

I left the BBC in 1999, when the war in my father's country and mine, was reaching its nadir. My stepmother had been forced to flee in 1997 and had spent more than a year as a refugee in our home in London. It is an eerie feeling to watch your country implode on television, to see places you have known destroyed, to search for familiar faces among the crowds of civilians trying to reach safety. And then there was the misreporting, the simplifying and the plain inaccuracy of many of the press stories. Impossible not to notice how a contemporaneous war - that in the former Yugoslavia - was reported with every political nuance, where ours was stripped of meaning, turned into mere spectacle. Our violence was rendered "senseless" in the truest meaning of the word.

I left the BBC to write a memoir *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, the story of the life and death of my father, a political activist who was executed in 1975 by the regime he had opposed. In his final letter, written on paper given to him in order that he might beg the president to spare his life, and written with a pen given for the same purpose, he wrote instead an address to the nation and had it smuggled out of the prison. In his letter he traced the events of the past and predicted war as the final destination for a country already on the path to dictatorship. The political underpinnings of the war rendered "senseless" by the world's media had been foreseen decades before.

"Nonfiction reveals the lies, but only metaphor can tell the truth" I've quoted it so many times during moments like this one that on the Internet it is now ascribed to me, but I was not the originator. That may have been Nadine Gordimer; I'm afraid I heard it secondhand and now cannot recall. But the reason I quote it so often is because I have found nothing more true to my writing life. Becoming a novelist for me was the result of the incremental process of realizing, through the process of writing, the specific powers of fiction.

I teach an undergraduate class called Witness Literature. In the first week we read and discuss Nadine Gordimer's essay, "Witness: The Inward Testimony" The essay was first delivered by Gordimer to the Swedish Academy in 2001 just a few months after 9/11. It begins with the words: "September 2001. A sunny day in New York. Many of us who are writers were at work on the transformations of life into a poem, story, a chapter of a novel, when terror pounced from the sky and we were made witness to it." To act as a witness to world events, to bestow upon those events understanding and meaning was, in Gordimer's view, the greatest responsibility of a writer. To witness, as she bore witness, to the injustices of apartheid in South Africa, was to more than document that injustice, but, and in her own words, to enable the "transformation of events, motives, reactions, from the immediacy into the enduring significance that is meaning." In other words, to see beyond the acts of violence, to what is really going on.

First published in the *Kenyon Review*, Nov/Dec 2019, Vol. XLI, No. 6.

For me, as a reader, growing up in Sierra Leone and in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, everything I knew about apartheid South Africa I gleaned from reading the novels of Gordimer and her contemporaries. The books that reached us were mainly those written in English by white, South African writers, because these were the writers with access to international publishers. It was only one part of the whole story I realized, but it was enough. As a schoolgirl I wept over *Cry, the Beloved Country*. At university I went to Trafalgar Square, and I joined the protests. The white, South African father of a friend of mine challenged my understanding of the situation. I remember he used an argument popular among conservatives at the time, that apartheid and its laws stood for nothing more than the separation of the races. But I knew different. I knew what was "*really going on*."

In a sense the decision to write about war was forced upon me. I felt it my duty as a writer, but it also seemed to me to be a privilege to find myself alive and writing at a time when my country was searching for important answers.

The late Ursula Le Guin told us in 2015, three years before her death, that the world now more than ever needed writers who "can remember freedom." These are her words: "Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom - poets, visionaries - realists of a larger reality."

Too often everywhere in the world the press favors the spectacular over the catastrophic, preferring to report individual atrocities rather than document longer term injustices. The obligation to look beyond the immediate, as Nadine Gordimer said, is increasingly the job of the writer, of those of us blessed with the "awesome responsibility of [our] endowment with the seventh sense of the imagination."

In 2015, when Le Guin spoke those words, it was also the thirtieth anniversary of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. I first read the book when it came out and I was at university. My stepfather worked as a diplomat for the United Nations and had been posted to Tehran some years earlier. As a consequence I spent much of 1979 in Iran, witnessing first hand the people's revolution that resulted in the overthrow of the Shah, followed by the hijacking of that revolution by religious zealots. I was fourteen, and revolutionary Tehran was a very strange place to go through puberty. My newly arrived womanhood brought with it no gifts, only the realization that I had become something to be controlled and constrained, something lesser than my brothers. I saw and experienced rights being withdrawn from people, from women, from me.

Atwood saw it, too. The dawn of a new religious fundamentalism in the Middle East inspired her to write *The Handmaid's Tale* in answer to the complacency of the West, that it could never happen here. Gilead, the fictional American state run by Christian fundamentalists in *The Handmaid's Tale* is both the past and the future. Every one of the horrific punishments described in the novel had at some point been used somewhere in the world. When I reread the book two years ago to write about it for the thirtieth anniversary of its publication, I was astonished at Atwood's prescience: "It was after the catastrophe" says the handmaiden

First published in the *Kenyon Review*, Nov/Dec 2019, Vol. XLI, No. 6.

Offred, "when they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic Fundamentalists."

"We'll need writers who can remember freedom" said Le Guin. It's no coincidence that Atwood, Le Guin, and Gordimer are near contemporaries. They can remember apartheid in South Africa, segregation in the US, the Cold War, the Berlin Wall, Mao's China, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the ebb and flows of freedom around the world.

I remember freedom. I remember freedom being taken away. I grew up in Sierra Leone. In 1961, some years before I was born, Sierra Leone had attained independence from Britain. For several years the country was heady with freedom. Democracy was young, too young to know that freedom can be both given and taken away. In the 1970s we came under the rule of a despot, and one by one our freedoms were removed. My father was a political activist; his freedom and then his life were taken away. When I wrote my memoir of his life and death, the question I asked myself was: how does a country implode? I tried to trace the steps back from the point where we left the path. It is a question that has preoccupied me for more than a decade and over three novels, imagining myself each time into a different character with a different set of choices and so encourage my readers to do the same. To imagine what it is like to be Hawa, whose son joins the rebel soldiers and brings her looted gifts, or Serah, tasked with bringing in the ballot as soldiers try to drive voters from the polling station, or consider the choices made by the morally equivocating Elias Cole, who betrays his friend and arguably in so doing, a future generation. How can we free ourselves from repeatedly committing the mistakes of the past? In *The Hired Man* I considered the war in Croatia, the many similarities in how a country on a different continent and many thousands of miles away had come to suffer the same fate as ours.

There are many reasons why I write. I write better to understand the world. I write because I wish the world to be better. I write because it is the thing I do best that might make that happen. Every now and again in a writer's life something occurs that makes you remember why you do the thing you do.

In May of 2014 I received an email from a woman I had met only once in the past. She asked if she might put me in touch with a friend of hers recently released from detention in Sudan. He had read my book, she said, and knowing she had spent time in Sierra Leone, he wondered if she knew me. Well, Sierra Leone is such a tiny country I often say that there exist, rather than the usual six, only two degrees of separation. In other words, pretty much everyone knows everyone else or someone who does. I agreed to take a call from her friend, the former political detainee who was then living in Kenya. His name is Ezekiel, and this is the story he told me.

Along with three other men, he had been arrested the previous December, accused of conspiring to overthrow the government and charged with multiple offenses, including murder, terrorism, and treason. The men were not held at the state prison but at the National Security Headquarters where on many days they heard rifles being fired in the yard and were never sure whether these were drills or prisoner executions.

One day the men were each given copies of a book and ordered to read it. The title of the book was *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, the author a woman called Aminatta Forna. The men read the book, because they were obliged to do so, but they also discussed it

First published in the *Kenyon Review*, Nov/Dec 2019, Vol. XLI, No. 6.

among themselves in the evenings. They saw the obvious parallels in their story and the story they were reading, and they concluded that the reason they had been given it, as with the gunfire outside their cell windows, was in an effort to intimidate them. "They were trying to tell us" said Ezekiel to me during our conversation, "that the same fate awaited us as had awaited your father." But reading the book didn't make the men despair; instead, he said, "it had the opposite effect." It invigorated them. It renewed their convictions. It made them remember freedom, their own and their country's. The four men promised that if they were ever released they would find the author of this book and tell her what it had meant to them. At their trial a few months later the government case against them collapsed, and they were set free. Ezekiel did not forget his promise to find me.

To write is to enter the thoughts of people you may never meet. There is nothing like it, this meeting of minds. A story travels continents and decades to resonate with each new reader in different ways. All readers bring something of their own to the story. It is the sharing of human consciousness. Ask me why I write, and if I told you nothing else, I would tell you the story of Ezekiel.

First published in the *Kenyon Review*, Nov/Dec 2019, Vol. XLI, No. 6.